San Francisco Bay's fuel spill controversy and a long-term approach

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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It is essential to deal with an oil or fuel spill by reacting quickly to an immediate crisis with a sure-fire plan, so as to mitigate the damage. However, to wring our hands and strive to react perfectly next time is a short-term fix for a long-term, chronic crisis that requires stopping pollution at the source. Addressing our consumption of petroleum, at a time of peaking global extraction and the consequence of global heating -- a.k.a. oil-company weather -- is the task for saving our embattled ecosystem.

For maximum conservation and curtailment of oil use, we should keep in mind that all oil extracted goes into the environment; it is all burned or spilled. A valuable lesson from a major spill is that it offers an approach for dealing with imminent petrocollapse: the effects of peak oil deserve disaster/emergency preparedness at the local level at least. (I offered these points in testimony at San Francisco City Hall, Dec. 3, 2007 at a hearing on a disastrous accident.)

On Nov. 7, 2007, the 900-foot container ship Cosco Busan was navigating through the San Francisco Bay fog. It crashed into Span D of the Bay Bridge, spilling 58,000 gallons of bunker fuel. A simultaneous "spill" was in the form of 45 tons of plastic smashed off from the bridge's fender during the impact. Two-thirds of this plastic is who-knows-where, perhaps non-recoverable, due to its submersion and black color.

Key Coast Guard personnel lost their jobs over the mistakes in handling the crisis. The first hearing San Francisco City and County has had on the disaster was on Dec. 3, when Supervisor Ross Mirkarimi chaired a three-hour Public Safety Committee hearing to get at the reasons for what he found to be the City's less than high-quality emergency response.

Most of the Supervisors were not advised of the crisis until hearing about it through the news media, so they could not direct constituents volunteering for clean-up duty. Supervisor Mirkarimi is even on the Disaster Council and was not notified promptly. This breakdown in communications was something other officials acknowledged was not good procedure, as they were grilled at the City Hall hearing.

The Port of San Francisco authority was on top of the crisis, aware of the fact that it was a hazardous-material spill: bunker fuel. It looks like heavy, black crude oil, but is the dregs of the refining process. Workers at San Francisco's Embarcadero waterfront were overcome with nausea and headaches, supposedly from a 140-gallon spill. It was revised upward to 58,000 gallons later on. Only eight thousand gallons ended up being recovered, and the official announcement was "no health risk." This dangerously erroneous characterization is in part due to the mind set that it was "just" an "oil" spill. For one thing, 1,500 volunteers came forward and many eventually dispatched once the bureaucracy at the command center in Fort Mason allowed the helpers -- did they all know this was not crude oil but bunker

fuel?

Heads of City agencies such as Fire Dept. (Chief Hayes-White) and Division of Emergency Services (Laura Phillips) testified, along with the mayor's chief of staff, in a defensive mode. Committee Chairman Mirkarimi was prepared enough to not need to apologize or back down, as he pointed out the SNAFUs should have been expected, from experience with a1996 spill of 40,000 gallons that harmed the Bay. The plans for response come down from the federal and state government, but the players on hand did not, apparently in Mirkarimi's view, take the bull by the horns and jump into action in the early moments to fight the spill in its magnitude. They had to put up with the Coast Guard's telling them that the City had no ability to participate. Even more uncooperative was the State's Office of Oil Spill Recovery.

The officials at yesterday's hearing certainly gave the impression they did their jobs well. The main failure impacting San Francisco's marine environment stemmed from the Coast Guard's excluding San Francisco's various agencies from helping (except for the police who used their own boat, according to Chief Heather Fong). For example, the Fire Department's boats were never engaged. Yet, Mirkarimi would not let the City off for failing to anticipate non-cooperation from the Coast Guard and the State.

The Mayor, having been misinformed, went out of town, and the City's best defense against the creeping, sloshing toxic oil came from about 20 fishing boats who knew the tides and currents better than the feds did. But to blame the Coast Guard for incompetence and noncooperation does not help the damaged wildlife or tainted food supply. Last week the crab season was allowed to open, but with such a polluted Bay -- even without the latest spill -- who in their right mind would consume seafood out of such an environment, with poison runoff from all the surrounding land's motor vehicles, lawn chemicals, and many more poisons such as plastics?

Fortunately, Public Safety Committee Chairman Ross Mirkarimi is the same leader who hammered through the City's

peak oil resolution, resulting in the Peak Oil Preparedness Task Force. He also is the person most responsible for the City's passing the ban on petroleum plastic shopping bags that took effect last month. I ran into him at the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition's annual Winterfest fundraiser Sunday night, and he seemed to want me to attend his hearing. Here is what I said in the public-comment period after listening to all the testimony:

I'm Jan Lundberg of Culture Change. I am a member of the City's Peak OIl Preparedness Task Force.

I can address a "what if" scenario that has been discussed here today as needing to be identified.

I'd like to point out that all the oil goes into the environment if it's extracted, whether it is burned or spilled.

Today's oil consumption is completely unsustainable, and supply is extra precarious.

Supervisor Mirkarimi, you have led the City and the nation on targeting oil, through the Peak Oil Resolution, the Task Force, and banning plastics. Please keep it up.

I believe San Francisco needs an Oil Demand Reduction Tsar, because all Departments need to follow a strong plan to slash oil consumption both by the Departments and all citizens.

Bunker fuel is extremely toxic and should not be touched by skin. It is much worse than crude oil. "No health risk" is doubtful.

The oil industry works in its refining sector like a three-legged stool: There are light products, such as gasoline; middle distillates such as diesel, and heavy products such as bunker fuel and asphalt. The oil industry mainly profits off gasoline, and the other products must be gotten rid of so as to keep up volume and profits. So we have a lot of asphalt and bunker fuel to be dealt with.

The Division of Emergency Services and the Emergency Operations Center need to be prepared for the effects of peak oil or petrocollapse or shortage from another oil embargo.

I invite these Departments, the Supervisors, and the Mayor to come to the Peak Oil Preparedness Task Force meetings, the first of which is this Wednesday at 2:30 here in City Hall in room 421. Thank you.

After returning from the podium to my seat I was approached by a Port of San Francisco official who asked to meet for follow-up discussion. I told him of my oil industry/government agency/utilities past experience. I am happy to talk about the big picture with anyone. I urge you, reader, to address your local authorities to urge proactive measures to reduce the threat petroleum poses to the survival of life as we know it. The oil-spill disasters such as San Francisco's, and the one in the Black Sea around the same time (ten times the volume spilled), are the tip of the iceberg.

The course of the Titanic cannot be changed fast enough by now to avert disaster already manifesting itself. But our responses and use of the lifeboats are on the table. It's time to take them off the table, lower the boats (and maybe build some more right quick), hoist the sails, dip the oars, and take to the waves.

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Oil Spill (Cosco Busan) San Francisco's Division of Emergency Services/Unified Command website:

coscobusanincident.com

See excellent photographs of the bunker fuel spill and the aftermath in San Francisco Bay:

sfgov.org